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Everyone loves schools

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SACRAMENTO -- Assembly Republicans are working on a plan to give schools more money next year without a tax increase, countering a drive by Democrats to protect schools with a tax increase.

Legislators in both parties oppose Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal for a record cut in school funding to help close a huge shortfall in the budget for the new fiscal year that begins July 1.

Democratic legislators have been holding rallies around the state to protest school cuts. A Democratic proposal for a \$1.2 billion tax on oil producers to protect schools was blocked by Republicans last month.

Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines of Clovis said at a news conference today that his caucus believes "you can still do year-over-year growth" for schools and avoid teacher layoffs without raising taxes.

The Assembly Republican goal is to give schools more money next year than they are receiving this year (year-over-year growth) without making a controversial vote to suspend the Proposition 98 school-funding guarantee.

Although the Republican plan would protect schools, other programs in the budget would have to be cut.

"It will mean, though, that priorities are chosen in other places in the budget," said Villines.

Some of the public-employee unions that formed a broad coalition that successfully opposed Schwarzenegger's "Year of Reform" initiatives in 2005 are talking about a new coalition to oppose his budget cuts this year.

At their news conference, Assembly Republicans touted a half dozen bills that would give local school districts more flexibility in spending money and parents more information about school spending and performance.

Assemblyman Martin Garrick, R-Solana Beach, said the superintendents of nine school districts in his Assembly district had a common theme when responding to a request for suggestions about dealing with tight budgets.

"Sacramento hamstring the school districts with too many mandates, and they wanted more flexibility and freedom," said Garrick.

The announcement of proposals from the Assembly Republican task force did not directly address school funding. An aide said a proposal may be made before Schwarzenegger issues a revised budget plan on May 14.

The Republicans are talking about using more than \$1 billion in school proposals suggested by the nonpartisan legislative analyst. The plan could include about \$900 million in cuts from non-school programs.

A package of mid-year cuts enacted in February made a \$507 million shuffle in school funding expected to have little impact. Most of the school cuts were funds not expected to be spent this year.

Among the programs hit hard in February was Medi-Cal health care for the needy. A 10 percent reduction in Medi-Cal provider rates begins July 1, saving the state \$544 million next year.

Health care advocates warned that Medi-Cal rates are already so low that many doctors and other health care providers do not accept Medi-Cal patients, making it difficult for them to find care.

"These cuts will not only leave millions of Californians stranded with reduced or no access to their critical health care needs, but could break the back of a health care system that is already under serious strain," the president of the California Medical Association, Dr. Richard Frankenstein, warned in a news release.